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Standing at the Crossroads: Taking the Path of Least Resistance or Forging Ahead Toward Action-Oriented Assessment?

Jaci Webb-Dempsey

Over the past decade, many universities and colleges who prepare teachers have begun the hard work of establishing partnerships with K–12 schools in order to simultaneously renew the preparation and practice of teachers. Since 1988, West Virginia University has partnered with a network of public schools to redesign its teacher education program and establish Professional Development Schools as vehicles for simultaneous renewal. The partnership, known as the Benedum Collaborative, has grown from its original membership of the Colleges of Human Resources and Education and Arts and Sciences and five public schools to include the university, five school districts, and 29 Professional Development Schools. This initiative has required participants to make a commitment to the belief that practice should be the foundation of teacher preparation and that practitioners should be integrally involved in both the preparation of the next generation of teachers and the continuous renewal of teaching and learning in their schools and in the larger educational community.

The historical origins of this premise are well-documented in the work of John Dewey and the establishment of lab schools similar to the Dewey School and Colonel Parker's "practice school" in the late 1890s. More recently, this belief has been emphasized in the work of organizations such as the Holmes Partnership and Goodlad's National Network for Education Renewal. The lab schools of the 1800s also had another charge – the systematic generation of a knowledge base about teaching and learning in the context of classrooms. As Dewey (1900) shared, much of the work done in lab schools was to "exhibit, test, verify and criticize theoretical statements and principles" and "to add to the sum of facts and principles in its special line." While some might take issue with the notion of schools as labs for testing theory, arguing instead that they are contexts for developing our theories of teaching and learning, I would certainly agree that this focus on inquiry should be an essential feature of the continuous and generative renewal of school/university partnerships. Further, it is the willingness to take risks and the growing capacity for practice-based inquiry that uniquely positions partnerships as places where we can begin to move toward practice-based, action-oriented assessment.

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Looking nationally, the institutionalization of this latest manifestation of practice-based preparation is apparent in the development and implementation of National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education standards for Professional Development Schools and mandatory requirements or legislative support for school/university partnerships in some states. The growing number of school/university partnerships and Professional Development Schools in this country reflects a growing consensus, at least among educators, that the contexts of teaching and learning really are where we come to better understand best practice. This shift from the traditional, heavily theoretical model of teacher preparation programs, housed and delivered by institutions of higher education, to practice as the context for preparation has also begun to translate into alternative models for generating knowledge about teaching and learning and assessing the quality of teaching practice.

The partnership at West Virginia University, similar to school/university partnerships elsewhere, not only acknowledges the expertise grounded in practice – it invites practitioners to the table when program policy is being crafted, when program evaluation is being designed, and when assessment systems for documenting the performance of preservice teachers are being developed. Both extending and honoring that invitation has been a test of the previously mentioned partnership and the new roles and relationships it represents. Struggles over who should have the last say in matters of program development and assessment have occurred because opportunities were created for issues of ownership to be confronted. Stakeholders came to the table and worked out their differences and, in the process, learned how to engage in productive collaboration. It would have been far easier and much less time-consuming to continue making decisions behind the walls of separate institutions rather than view decision points as opportunities to build a collaborative culture. However, in the long run it is that shared culture that strengthens our work.

An area where we continue to confront issues of ownership in the Collaborative has to do with who generates legitimate knowledge about teaching and learning, how they generate it, and what we do with it once we have it. The ownership of research on teaching and learning has emerged as one of the last bastions of the traditional academic orientation, bolstered by the norms of academe that continue to value and reward "ivory tower" models of scholarship. Just as the shift to sites of practice as sites of teacher preparation and professional development has been hotly contested, the concurrent and complimentary shift toward acknowledgement of teacher research as both a legitimate source of professional knowledge and a rich form of professional development is not without its challenges. Strategic public discourse and exemplary sites of innovation have driven and legitimated the shift in teacher preparation and professional development, and those factors have also begun driving a shift in our understandings of legitimate inquiry. Researchers in the field of teacher education have for some time been making the argument that teacher research, or action research, "has particular potential for transforming the university-generated knowledge base" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Discourse related to this shift has fostered risk-taking and partnering among teachers in particular schools, between teachers and university faculty, and between teachers, university faculty and teacher education students. These networks of teacher researchers have begun to share their work more publicly, extending that discourse and contesting the traditional lines of ownership. In addition to the issue of ownership of

the creation and application of a knowledge base lies the high stakes issues surrounding the assessment of teaching.

Assessing Teachers

The acknowledgement of the legitimacy of practice-based preparation, professional development, and research has begun to have a ripple effect in the area of teacher assessment. While some state systems and national teacher quality assurance organizations such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards have established a foundation for more performance-based assessments of teacher quality by either requiring or strongly encouraging portfolio documentation of teaching performance, the majority of state systems continue to rely on standardized tests, either of teachers or their students, as the primary measure of teacher quality.

At the state level, entrance to the profession typically requires novice teachers to meet state standards for Praxis exams or National Teacher exams and practitioner performance is most often examined by proxy via inadequate and often misapplied analyses of student achievement test data. At the federal level, school success continues to be measured by tests of student achievement, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Policymakers and the general public continue to be more invested in these test scores due to beliefs that they are less subjective and more easily understood than emerging forms of alternative assessment. Those of us who have undertaken the task of developing performance-based assessment systems in our teacher preparation programs would acknowledge the tremendous investment of time and energy this task requires. We would also acknowledge the time and energy required to build common understandings of more complex indicators of performance such that these systems can be implemented effectively. It is far less demanding to require preservice and experienced teachers to simply take a test that will supposedly assign a numeric value to what a teacher knows about what to do in a classroom than it is to attempt to document what it is that they actually do and the impact of those practices on student learning. It is also much more efficient and, in the short-term, cheaper to render judgment based on a test administered over the course of several hours versus rigorous observation, collection of artifacts, and reflection over the course of many months. While experience and common sense tell us which measure is most meaningful, standards of utility, efficiency and cost often lead our constituents to demand the lesser measure.

Based on what we have learned in our work with the Benedum Collaborative establishing Professional Development Schools, developing a performance-based assessment system, and encouraging and supporting teacher action research, we argue for a very different way of assessing teacher quality. We stake the claim that teacher assessment practices should not just assess the performance of preservice teachers or count the numbers of teachers who apply for National Board certification, but rather it should emphasize the value of engaging in rich, meaningful, ongoing assessment of teacher practice at all stages of teacher development. Further, we argue that those of us serving as teacher educators at colleges and universities must be held to the same standards with similar forms of assessment. Given the need for assessment and the need for ongoing professional development targeted to address areas of weakness, engaging in assessment that looks like teacher research will not only address issues of efficiency and cost, but also serve multiple needs. What follows is a description of the path the Benedum Collaborative has taken toward new forms of assessment.

Action Research in the Benedum Collaborative

One of the first steps taken when the Benedum Collaborative began its work over a decade ago was the generation of two sets of principles that guide the development of Professional Development Schools and the preparation of novice teachers. The five Professional Development Schools Belief Statements (Holmes Group, 1990) describe the kinds of places we believe schools should be in order to best support the continuous professional development of teachers and the learning experiences of K–12 students and preservice teachers. The five-year Benedum Collaborative Teacher Education Program is guided by a set of ten characteristics that complement the Professional Development Schools Belief Statements, describing the kinds of teachers we expect our teacher education students to become. Cross-referenced with the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium principles and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards propositions, our characteristics are similar to standards developed by numerous other teacher preparation programs and organizations around the country. The novice teacher described by this set of characteristics is:

(1) committed to lifelong learning;
(2) an effective communicator;
(3) cognizant of the professional, moral and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning;
(4) a facilitator of learning for all students;
(5) able to draw upon an in-depth knowledge of pedagogy;
(6) able to draw upon an in-depth knowledge of content;
(7) able to effectively integrate content and pedagogy;
(8) a reflective practitioner;
(9) aware of and respectful of human diversity;
(10) liberally educated.

In the Professional Development Schools and in the teacher education program, there is an intentional focus on reflective practice as a vehicle for continuous school and professional renewal.

A major factor that fosters reflective practice is a required course in the five-year program, Teacher as Researcher, which guides students in the development of the skills and habits of mind that enable and encourage ongoing, systematic reflection. Students begin their work for this course four semesters before they officially enroll in it, attending an introductory action research seminar during the third year of the program, participating in seminars designed to educate them in research methods, crafting their action research proposals during the fourth year, and completing their action research projects as a demonstration of the culminating research competency as Masters candidates during the fifth year. Students develop their understandings of action research and their studies in the context of extensive clinical experience, spending two hours each week in their host PDS as third year tutors; one to two days each week as fourth year participants; and a full semester as interns.mThey enroll in Teacher as Researcher for graduate credit during the final semester of the fifth year when they are engaged in disseminating the results of their research in papers, Web postings, exhibit posters, and presentations at their Professional Development Schools and at an annual conference sponsored by the Benedum Collaborative. Throughout the five semesters of the action research experience, students are supported by both K-12 and university faculty

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and are mentored by preservice teachers further along in the process. At any given time, faculty are mentoring students at all phases of the action research process, from selecting their study focus to disseminating their results. Supporting this mentorship requires a great deal of communication and capacity-building. To this end, a number of faculty from programs across the College of Human Resources and Education, including faculty from Educational Leadership, Educational Psychology, Technology Education, Special Education, Speech Pathology and Audiology, Curriculum and Instruction, Reading, and Social and Cultural Foundations, meet regularly to orchestrate not only the activities for students, but also professional development for faculty in action research.

While the research projects students complete have been called "action research" projects since the inception of the program, understandings of just what action research is and should be among university and Professional Development School faculty has varied. It has not been without struggle or strife that action research in our program has evolved from a quasi-traditional, discipline-based thesis to a multidisciplinary action research study. It has taken nearly five years and innumerable, sometimes contentious, discussions to reach a somewhat common understanding of what we mean by action research in the program. Kincheloe (1991) explains why this journey has been rocky: "The cult of the expert will undoubtedly be uncomfortable with such research populism." Some university faculty have chosen not to continue their participation in the action research process as that understanding has moved further and further from quasi-experimental designs and replication of well-understood and well-documented theories of teaching and learning, and further from their own imprimatur as researchers. Faculty in the Professional Development Schools, particularly in elementary settings, have been more accepting and supportive of movement away from purely discipline-based forms of inquiry, perhaps reflecting their explicit efforts in their teaching to integrate research across the curriculum. Regardless, even in the Professional Development Schools, there have been faculty members who have been uncomfortable yielding control and moving away from theory-testing to action-oriented inquiry. Along the way students, have often received mixed messages about what is and is not action research in the Benedum Collaborative, and these conflicts have been reflected in the topics and methods of their action research projects. For example, some students have chosen to study topics such as the effects of various classroom seating arrangements on student engagement or the effects of classical music on test scores rather than focusing on issues far more critical to their teaching performance, such as the conditions that promote meaningful learning, because they believed such studies would be easier to design in ways that could document cause and effect. Not surprisingly, these studies reflected the interests and methodologies of their university mentors rather than methods that would enable preservice teachers to learn to document the complexities of classroom environments and create rich descriptions of how they support learning.

The definition of action research the Collaborative has recently "officially" adopted is focused on developing the skills and reflective habits necessary to engage in action research as preservice teachers with the intention of motivating them to adopt a reflective stance in their professional practice. The action research conducted by preservice teachers in the five-year teacher education program is intended to be deliberate, improvement-oriented investigation of teaching practice, characterized by an ongoing process of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action, and, finally, problem redefinition. As teacher action research is often a collaborative activity where practitioners work together to help one another design and carry out investigations in their classrooms and schools, preservice teachers may choose to conduct their research collaboratively. Regardless, each action research project is derived collaboratively, involving preservice teachers, host teachers, teacher education coordinators, and university liaisons in the identification of an area of inquiry and the design of an investigation. The terms "action" and "research" are used in conjunction to represent the essential features of this cyclical process; that is, trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1982). Action research in the five-year program is not about testing theory, improving the work environment of teachers, developing school policy, or revising a school-wide curriculum; instead it is focused on teaching practice at the classroom level. Practitioners may conduct action research to enhance their professional lives and school level policies and practices; however, action research conducted by our preservice teachers is conducted to enhance their understandings about both their own teaching and their students' learning. Teacher education students are encouraged to involve themselves in these other kinds of research activities at their Professional Development Schools when doing so serves a need at the school and their own professional goals as preservice teachers. While conducted in a systematic manner with integrity, this action research is not traditional "scientific research." It is not conducted by university professors or scholars and does not include experimental and control groups that would exclude groups of students from a beneficial teaching practice.

This definition is somewhat limited in that we are concerned with issues of control, e.g., not controlling variables and intervening factors, but control over the practice or program being investigated. Students are encouraged to focus on classroom practice and discouraged from looking at school policies and programs over which they have no purview and limited opportunity to make improvements or "take action." In the past few years students have been encouraged to collaborate with one another to look at their topics collectively in a variety of classroom contexts. This year a small number of our students will also collaborate with their host teachers to implement their studies.

Inquiry and Assessment in the Collaborative

The process of forging a shared understanding of action research, including its purposes and processes, has forced us to also consider the broader application of this stance beyond teacher preparation. While the Collaborative has historically supported the efforts of university and K–12 faculty to document those practices being developed and applied in the context of the Professional Development Schools, the forms of documentation have typically reflected standards of scholarly research, rather than research on teaching and learning. Three major initiatives have involved Professional Development Schools and university faculty in collaborative research: (1) a comprehensive assessment of the impact of Professional Development Schools; (2) a Writer's Guild designed to support faculty writing projects; and (3) the requirement that all site improvement grants awarded in the Collaborative be evaluated by the teachers engaged in the initiative. In the assessment study, school and university faculty and graduate students work together as a team to design and implement research intended to

document and describe the impact of the Professional Development Schools initiative by interviewing, observing, and surveying teachers and students in the Professional Development Schools. The Writer's Guild provides support for school and university faculty to work together over summers to analyze data and write about their joint research projects. Sometimes joint projects are evaluations of the site-based innovations implemented with funding from the Collaborative. Interestingly, while written representations have most often been presented as traditional research reports, oral representations have brought the work much closer to articulation of presenters' tacit knowledge of teaching and learning. It is this intersection of tacit and explicit knowledge that has been the "point of no return" for some colleagues and the point of departure from tradition for others. This point of intersection may also be the critical juncture for teacher assessment.

Blurring the Distinctions

In the early 1990s, Eisner described the need for a form of teacher evaluation that is an inherent part of teachers' everyday lives and is an iterative, reflective and participatory process (Eisner 1990). Weiss and Weiss (1998), in their synthesis of the research on teacher evaluation, proposed that such assessment is becoming more necessary. They describe the growing acknowledgement of the complexities of teaching practice and recognition that meaningful and useful forms of assessment must reflect those complexities. Weiss and Weiss (1998) further postulate that teachers are becoming more adept at "developing multidimensional, integrated learning environments where knowledge depends on the values of the persons working with it and the context within which that work [is conducted]." We suggest that assessment must, therefore, become more expert at capturing that which is idiographic. In a recent article, Hiebert, Gallimore and Stigler (2002) suggest that the field of educational research should, "explore the possibility of building a useful knowledge base for teaching by beginning with practitioners' knowledge." They go on to outline key features of teacher knowledge: (1) It is linked with practice; (2) It is detailed, concrete and specific; and (3) It is integrated. It is this latter feature that simultaneously makes teacher knowledge so useful and so difficult to document.

Assessment that will measure the kinds of performances we expect from the teachers we are attempting to grow in the Benedum Collaborative should reflect the values that nurture their development. Those values include committing to a career of learning, reflection, integration, and collaboration. We are consciously preparing the next generation of teachers to be not just critical consumers, but also producers and participants in knowledge about best practice. In his discussion of the action research orientation, Kincheloe (1991) explains:

> Unlike empirical instruments, humans can synthesize information, generate interpretations, and revise and sophisticate those interpretations at the site the inquiry takes place. In the process the human as research instrument can explore the unusual, the idiosyncratic situations... teacher researchers can revolutionize professional practice by viewing themselves as potentially the most sophisticated research instruments available.

Action research not only provides a renewable knowledge base for teaching, but also provides the foundation and vehicle for assessment of teaching practice. Action research is both professional development and knowledge production. If the ultimate goal of assessment is to improve practice, rather than categorize and then reward "good" teachers and punish "bad" teachers, what is a better process than one grounded in the idiographic context of a teacher's practice, one that identifies real problems, and one that is in and of itself a vehicle for improvement?

As we prepare the next generation of teachers to be researchers, we should consider the opportunity we have to shape the future of educational research, the assessment of teaching, and how to best take advantage of that opportunity. School/university partnerships and professional development school networks have proven to be the kinds of cultural places where we have been able to take the risks that the movement to legitimate teacher action research requires. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue that "research by teachers represents a distinctive way of knowing about teaching and learning that will alter – not just add to – what we know in the field." At the same time, they identify four obstacles that have historically constrained movement in this direction:

> We argue that to encourage wider involvement of teachers in research, it is necessary to overcome the serious obstacles caused by teacher isolation, a school culture that works against raising questions, a technical view of knowledge for teaching, and the negative reputation of educational research.

The collaborative cultures that characterize professional development school partnerships and their mission of simultaneous renewal make them communities that can overcome these obstacles to support and nurture innovations. They are also the best places to begin systematically moving toward the development of new forms of action-oriented assessment. After all, collaborative processes contribute to collective understandings, and that is what accountability is all about.

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